



Ted Kooser: A Gateway Poet, a Local Wonder, or the Next Robert Frost?

Scholars, critics, and readers have debated the issue of accessibility in poetry since high modernism gave way to contemporary poetry that appealed to a wider, less academic audience. The position of National Poet Laureate has recently been offered to contemporary “accessible” poets such as Ted Kooser and Billy Collins, drawing attention to the issue of accessibility in poetry. Some of those involved in this debate, such as Ron Silliman and John Gallaher, emphatically claim that widely read poets such as Kooser dilute the quality of poetry as an art form. In opposition, critics such as Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as average readers, find Kooser’s poetry to be refreshing and thoroughly enjoyable. Adding to the complexity of this debate is the fact that the definition of “accessible” alters according to the readers’ understanding of the concept. Applying criteria of accessibility to several of Kooser’s poems reveals his adherence to his stated poetic goals. Though Kooser’s poetry may seem to be written for an audience whose major concern is instant gratification, his poems’ accessibility serves its purpose—namely, to engage readers and provide them with a rewarding literary experience. When applied to Kooser’s poems, the term “accessible” is neither pejorative nor neutral; instead, labeling his poetry as “accessible” represents the achievement of his personal poetic ambitions. Labeling Kooser as “accessible” as a result of his adherence to Midwestern poetics does not diminish his universal appeal, for his poetry cannot be limited by regionalism. Exploring “accessible” in terms of critics’ and readers’ responses to so-called accessible poetry, establishing the sides of critical debate on the subject, and providing both Kooser’s poetic goals and close readings of his poems reveal the varied benefits of writing accessible poems. Kooser emphasizes poetry serving its readers through delighting them and “re-freshening” their perspective of the world, a service enhanced by clarity, accessibility, and paying close attention to readers’ needs. Achieving communication is crucial in Kooser’s poems; accessibility is the method through which readers connect with each poem. Indeed, Kooser is a master of his craft; by writing accessible poems, Kooser welcomes unlikely readers into the literary realm while simultaneously enchanting avid poetry readers.

u

Holy Dark Age Batman! – Saint & Sinner: A Re-examination into the Continued Influence and Fallout of Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns

Frank Miller's Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (DKR) is considered one of the milestones in comic book literature and a work that almost single-handedly changed the landscape of the medium. According to Alan Moore, Miller was able to utilize all of the previously existing aspects of the Batman mythos while breaking out of the boundaries established on the mythos by 50 years of history and editorial mandate. Miller returned realism to a medium often thought of in terms of children's stories or nonsense. Miller's tale of Batman, through the use of mature themes and adult content, was able to recreate a medium once thought of as only children's literature. Through DKR, the comic book industry could now explore real world issues of politics and social critique through the eyes of heroic icons such as Batman and Superman. Other scholars (Parsons, Sharrett, and Meehan) acknowledge DKR for the creative force that broke the dam of an industry long trapped behind a wave of camp and stagnation. It is my assertion that DKR (now having reached its 21st birthday) dominates the comic book field with both positive and negative repercussions. DKR, having at one time saved a comic book industry too wrapped up in its own nostalgia to recognize its stagnation, imposed its own control over the industry by ushering an era of mature themed comics concerned more with violence and shock value than with quality of story. Over the course of my essay, I will not only examine the often traveled road of praise for Miller and DKR, but I will also pursue the path of blame that belongs to DKR as the catalyst for what Mark Voger called "the Dark Age of comics." Finally, I will look at the loss of the children's readership demographic within the mainstream comic book industry and the disastrous consequences this loss could entail on the long-term survival of the comic book industry.

W

Engl 801: Abstract for Paper #2
Prof. Westman
Nov. 27, 2007

Nonsense: Textual vs. Visual Manifestations in Various Editions of
Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat (1871)"

The study of literary nonsense denotes a specific field in which the "incongruous" mingles with sheer senselessness, humor, and delight. Entering a conversation started by Celia Anderson and Marilyn Apseloff, I explore the relationship between textual nonsense and the way in which it becomes manifest through visual means. Anderson and Apseloff cite three ways that illustrations interact with text, 1) illustrations can adhere to the text and merely support it by picturing the nonsense described, 2) illustrations can enhance or heighten the nonsense in the text, and 3) illustrations can contradict the text and subvert it, thereby creating a different type of nonsense. Applying Anderson and Apseloff's theory to Edward Lear's famous nonsensical poem, "The Owl and the Pussycat (1871)," I analyze textual elements of nonsense while also considering how Lear's original illustrations function in an enhancing or nugatory manner in regards to such nonsense. I conclude that the relationship between textual and visual nonsense in Lear's original work upholds the third point of Anderson and Apseloff's theory. I then move on to examine contemporary interpretations of Lear's text through the works of modern illustrators, James Marshall (1998), Hilary Knight (1983), and Jan Brett (1991), to determine the relationship between their illustrations and Lear's text. Upon examination of Marshall's illustrations, I determine that his illustrations heighten and enhance the nonsensical elements of Lear's text, by exaggeration and odd assortment illustration techniques. I conclude the same for Knights' work, however his illustrations enhance the nonsensical elements of Lear's poem through the intertextuality present in the illustrations as well as by his use of allusions throughout his visual interpretations of Lear's text. I next examine Jan Brett's interpretation of Lear's work, determining that her illustrations also adhere to the second of Anderson and Apseloff's theory, yet does so in a way that differs from Marshall and Knight. Brett's use of framing, by which she offers a parallel story and her depictions of the poem's main characters further enhance the aspects of the improbable in Lear's poem. I conclude that Anderson and Apseloff's theory is quite applicable to the relationship between textual nonsense and the visual manifestation of that nonsense through contemporary illustrators.